

CURRENT BOOKS

SCHOLARS' CHOICE

Recent titles selected and reviewed by Fellows and staff of the Wilson Center

Ireland, Whose Ireland?

MODERN IRELAND 1600-1972. By R. F. Foster. Viking. 688 pp. \$35.00

The history of Ireland, as I imbibed it at the Christian Brothers' School in Newry, was a simple story. For nearly 800 years an otherwise united country, in its essential character Gaelic and Catholic, has been occupied by a foreign invader. A decisive stage in this occupation involved the Plantation of Ulster, a monstrous arrangement in the 17th century by which soldiers of the British Crown were given, instead of payment in money, large tracts of land in the northern counties of Ireland. This land was seized from the Irish, and settled with English and Scots Presbyterian mercenaries and their dependents. As a result, a foreign element had prevented the peace and unity of the island. British domination culminated in the Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland (January 1, 1801). In every generation since 1798, a few heroic men had banded together and revolted against the Crown. These insurrections were brutally put down, their leaders executed or transported to Australia. On Easter Monday, 1916, Padraig Pearse and his associates proclaimed the Irish Republic, and fought to achieve it. They were defeated and put to death, but the flame of freedom had been lit and it could not be extinguished. In 1921, a mere five years after Easter Week, the British Government was forced to concede to the Irish people a partial recognition of their claim: independence, in effect, for 26 of the 32 counties of Ireland. Northern Ireland, established by the Government of Ireland Act on December 23, 1920, was secured for the benefit of Unionists, descendants of the Planters.

The logic of this lesson was not enforced, but it was clear enough. Ireland had not yet achieved its freedom and unity,

but in the fullness of time the partition of the country into a Protestant North and a Catholic South would be abolished. We would see "a nation once again."

The Christian Brothers did not urge us to prepare ourselves for the glorious day, or to join the Irish Republican Army, an institution that had fallen into decay and no longer represented a genuine Irish aspiration. But we were encouraged to regard the history of Ireland as unfinished business, a story that lacked only its happy ending. It was our duty to maintain a sense of Ireland, learn and speak its language, play its games, practice its ancient customs, and keep the Faith. As the National Program Conference on Primary Education meeting from January 6, 1921, urged, the chief aim of the teaching of Irish history should be "to inculcate national pride and self-respect . . . by showing that the Irish race has fulfilled a great mission in the advancement of civilization"; to ensure that "English authors, as such, should have just the limited place due to English literature among all the European literatures"; and that education should be organized "in order to revive the ancient life of Ireland as a Gaelic state, Gaelic in language, and Gaelic and Christian in its ideals."

R. F. Foster, who quotes that passage from the National Program Conference, is one of those Irish historians who question the "one story and one story only" as I received it at Newry. He refers to "the *soi-disant* 'revisionist' school of Irish historians, who since the 1940s have been dispassionately re-evaluating the assumptions of the 800-years-of-struggle version of Irish history." I assume he includes himself in the school. But *dispassionately*? It would be inaccurate to say that he has no axe to grind. A Protestant, born in Waterford and educated at Trinity College, Dublin, would not walk abroad in the streets

without an axe. But he is temperate in the wielding of it. He looks upon Ireland with rueful affection: a distressful country indeed, but not a bore.

Mostly, Foster thinks that what has been achieved in Ireland by noise and mayhem would have come to pass a year or two later in any case, quietly enough. Like many revisionists, he takes what I may call the *Fine Gael* view of Irish history, by which I mean to distinguish it at least officially from the *Fianna Fáil* view. These are the two main political parties in Ireland, still separated and distinguished only by the fact that their grandfathers took opposite sides in the Civil War of 1922–1923. The *Fianna Fáil* view, at least for oratorical purposes, is that of the “one story and one story only.” The *Fine Gael* view is that the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 was satisfactory enough to be going on with; it might lead to better things, even to the unification of Ireland, in time; and that for the time being it might be accepted by all parties.

Modern Ireland begins with Hugh O’Neill, Earl of Tyrone, challenging the imposition of English power in Ireland, a gesture symbolically rebuked a few months later, in 1601, when Mountjoy, the new Lord Deputy from England, smashed the pre-Christian stone at Tullahogue upon which the O’Neills were inaugurated. Thereafter, the issues and occasions Foster treats are mostly the standard ones: Plantation; Cromwellian Ireland; Restoration Ireland; the Protestant Ascendancy (which excluded Catholics from politics); the effect of the revolutions in America and France; the Famine; Charles Stewart Parnell and the development of Nationalism; the Irish Renaissance; the Easter Rising and its aftermath; Eamon de Valera’s Ireland; the emergence of a “modern” Ireland. The story concludes without ending in 1972, the year in which Ireland joined the European Economic Community, Edward Heath’s government suspended the Parliament of Northern Ireland and introduced direct rule from Westminster, and the people of Ireland removed, with no fuss or conflict, the clause in the Constitution of 1937 which gave a specially favored



Dubliners hail Eamon de Valera, 1917.

position to the Catholic Church.

What distinguishes *Modern Ireland* is the civility of Foster’s intelligence. He knows that the matters with which he is dealing are the very causes for which, in Belfast, Derry, and other places in Northern Ireland, people are giving and taking life. When a member of the Provisional I.R.A. shoots and kills a British soldier in Belfast, his reason—and to him, whether he could articulate it or not, his justification—is the history of Ireland as it has been represented to him at school or in stories, songs, the lore of the streets.

Foster wants to understand and then to explain how such violence has come about. He knows, though he cannot hope to overcome, the coercive force of historical images; they are the stuff of myths, which prompt people to act in accordance with them. He wishes to take the heat out of such imagery, but he is patient and

never shrill or peremptory in considering the issues, the events and personalities which the myths at once reveal and hide. Not "dispassionately" it seems to me, but equably. I am sure that Foster is writing on behalf of the values we find in his sentences: justice, lucidity, a sense of the relation between human action and the waste that necessarily darkens it. He writes superbly, not just well. He thinks as clearly as the complexity of the matters allows.

I am not entirely persuaded that he is right and the Christian Brothers in Newry wrong. The very fact that he and his colleagues are willing to see themselves as revisionists, without evident qualm or misgiving, is not reassuring: Revisionism is parasitic upon the myths it plans to subvert. There is no point at which one's irony ends, once it starts. We are all revisionists these days, I recall Foster saying a year or two ago. Perhaps we are. But I am not sure that we should be endlessly gratified by our belated wisdom. Posterity has not

yet spoken.

In the meantime, nothing but good—unless the good includes a tincture of complacency—can come from the application of intelligence such as Foster's to the history of Ireland. The present danger in writing about Irish history is that we may try, in Hans Blumenberg's phrase from *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, to give ourselves that past which releases us from the past. It is a temptation which Nietzsche offers in *Use and Abuse of History*: "We seek a past from which we may spring, rather than that past from which we seem to have derived." The problem with the history of Ireland is that many of us now crave to be released from it or by any means to transcend it. Foster's aim is to stay in history and make sense of it. What, starting perhaps afresh in 1972, we do with that sense is another day's work, matter for another story.

—Denis Donoghue '89

The Poet-Oracle of Spanish America

SOR JUANA OR, THE TRAPS OF FAITH.

By Octavio Paz. Translated by Margaret Sayers Peden. Harvard. 547 pp. \$29.95

For all our involvements with Latin America, the region—seemingly turbulent and resistant to modernization—offers no coherent image to Americans. The great Latin American novels of the 1960s and '70s, usually in fine translations, convey the spirit of the culture but are to most readers more expressive than explanatory. With Mexico, to be sure, where the biography at hand is set, we had a love affair from 1910 to 1940, during the heroic years of the Revolution: The country beguiled us with its muralists and its charismatic insurgents. By now, though, for most of us, Mexico has again receded into the Latin American miasma, where history seems predetermined yet shapeless, societies oppressed yet unruly, intellectual life stylish

yet rhetorical, popular culture vibrant yet declassé.

Of books in English which explain the historical logic and identity of these nations, few avoid the jargon of academia or the formulas of journalism. One vigorous exception is *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950; trans. 1961), a free-ranging essay on life and thought in Mexico by one of its leading poets and critics, Octavio Paz. Mentioned only in passing in his book is an intriguing figure, the 17th-century poet-nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Now, more than three decades later, Paz returns to this distant but kindred spirit, this time locating her at the center of a book four times the length of *Labyrinth*.

Sor Juana is no mere biography of a nun; even broader than *Labyrinth*, it moves easily among the philosophical, scientific, theological, and literary traditions that illuminate Sor Juana's cast of mind.